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## Racial Inequity and the Achievement Gap

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Ari K. Mwatela

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in  
Human Services at  
Winona State University  
Fall 2020

## RACIAL INEQUALITY AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Winona State University  
College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

## CAPSTONE PROJECT

Racial inequality and the Academic Achievement gap of African American Students

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Ari K. Mwatela

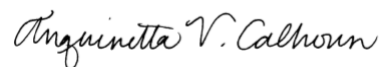
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Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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### Abstract

Disparities in the achievement between African American students, and their white peers are perspicuous through the exploration of the American educational paradigm; as it has remained unchanged through the decades, despite existing evidence of its need to evolve due to the dynamic American social zeitgeist. Current scholarly research seeks to illuminate the intersection of societal and systemic factors, as causes of the academic underachievement of African American students. It is worthwhile for stakeholders to consider this approach, as it is deemed to provide a more comprehensive statement, on how to intervene or accommodate students who fall within multiple marginalized groups. However, this literature review highlights the necessity of exploring the existence of the achievement gap from the singular viewpoints of racism and racial inequality. Sociological perspectives on racial inequality were explored to provide insight and create context on the passivity and apathy of systems and individuals, that instigate and perpetuate racial inequality. A survey of the markers that weaponize the achievement gap, such as disparities in discipline processes and course selection was conducted, as well as an exploration on those that functionalize it, such as disparities in grades, drop-out rates, college-completion rates, and standardized test-scores between African American students and white students.

*Keywords:* achievement gap, racial inequality, disparities, interventions, accommodations, educational paradigm

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### **Introduction**

In this review of literature, disparities in academic success that exist between white students, and African American students will be discussed. A dissemination of the nuances in racial inequalities will be conducted in order to provide the framework for conceptualizing the gaps in academic achievement between white students, and African American students. Pedagogical processes and intervention programs will also be discussed to highlight gaps in the provision of equitable services by educational institutions and their stakeholders. Lastly, roles that stakeholders such as teachers and school counselors can play to assist in the provision of inclusive, and equitable services to African American students will be discussed for the reader to assess at their discretion, and may provide future content for more researchers to explore on this topic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Race has been used by various individuals, systems, and societies to create different realities for individuals. In the United States of America, the realities and lives for people of color look remarkably different and despondent when compared with the realities of white Americans, with many of them facing discrimination and marginalization even as they participate in activities that are considered normal, such as visiting a coffee shop, or grilling in a public park, (Dorau, 2020, p.1). Muhammad (2015), mentions how bizarre it is to realize that the amount of melanin one possesses in the United States of America places them in spaces where they can either stand to gain more, or lose out on more educational opportunities, as he further illustrates that societies have constructed certain perceptions based on the race of individuals, a phenomenon that is ludicrous, as race is a social construct in of itself, (p.15). A perception births

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the actions and reactions of the individuals in society, as the upholding of certain beliefs belies the concept and nuances of racism (p.17-19). Melamed, Munn, Barry, Montgomery and Okuwobi, (2019) call attention to the malleability of racism, stating that all perceptions are made, and therefore can be unmade through paying attention to the how of the situation instead of the why; pinpointing steps in the process where interventions can be made. An examination of how these ‘meanings’ are created and maintained in society can be conducted through three different sociological perspectives or schools of thought; functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism (Muhammad, 2015, p.19).

Muhammad, (2015) writes of the fundamentals of these sociological perspectives; functionalism posits that anything upheld in a society for an extended time must serve a particular purpose for the society it exists in, functionalists would therefore state that racism and racial discrimination exist to serve as a function or a dysfunction for an individual or group of people in American society, (p.19). It is on this fundamental that *functional inequality* is borne, a concept that explains talent is not distributed equally and therefore society produces unequal opportunities, especially in progressive societies that thrive on the stratification of groups based off their perceived intellect. (p.44)

Conflict theory posits the dynamic nuances in the in-group, out-group analogy; stating that a systemically powerful majority group actively participates in a systematic disenfranchisement of members of another group, often in the spirit of suppressing their rights, thereby actively or passively contributing to their continued discrimination, (Sue, 2015, p.100). At the core of the theory is the establishment of in-groups and out-groups, where there is a constant solicitation of a divide based off the differences certain members of society believe are crucial to the determination of one’s class, (Sue, 2015, p.98).

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According to those who rely on interactionism in understanding race, it is the symbols of race and not race itself that create incidences of racism and racial discrimination. Interactionists have developed a framework for this phenomenon called the bias of crowd's model (BoS) which stipulates that individuals formulate associations dependent on the level of environmental racism surrounding them at the time. In this regard, individuals' perspectives are simply by products of their environment, and take a passive role in encouraging racial discrimination, Gawronski & Bodenhausen, (2017). A counter to this model's framework is the belief that preconceived associations hold a greater influence in formulating perceptions and beliefs, Sue, (2015) retells the story in which a white woman states that her grandmother feared all black men because she was attacked by black men, and not because she was prejudiced against them. It is posited at the end of the retelling, if the grandmother would fear all white men if her attackers were white instead, (p.8).

Symbols of black men as brutes and thugs have been interpreted as fact leading to the creation of stereotypes that are harmful to the livelihoods and psyche of black men, making it plausible in the story above that the grandmother already possessed beliefs regarding the morality of black men and grasped at her single misfortune to confirm what she believed all along, that black men were to be feared, (Sue, 2015, p. 9). Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2017), explain this through the framework of the associative-propositional evaluation model, which posits that stimuli interact with an individual's mental associations to produce specific mental contents (i.e. a person's mental representations affect their perceptions) only if they had stored pre-conceived associations about particular individuals.

A culmination of these different perspectives might have led to the emergence of a theory known as critical race theory. According to Muhammad (2015), the theory posits three lines of



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thought; a) that racism is considered as one of the standards in which a society should function and is therefore normal, b) that majority of the American population isn't willing to divest of their assets or psychological advantage in order to eradicate racism, and c) that racism is a social construct created by the manifestations of the relations and thoughts different people have. If we were to rely on hindsight, critical race theory should direct us to strive for a society that pleads empathy, integrity, and transparency when it comes to discussing or advocating for the eradication of racism, as a lack of these qualities would only serve to create further dissention between a society's perceived in-groups and out-groups, (p.19-20)

According to Dorau, (2020), it is just as important for us to consider why certain perceptions came to be in addition to why they are upheld. The genesis of racial inequality in the United States can be traced back to the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans who were brought to work for white masters on farms and houses for meager or no wages; "racial inequality is a long labored and complex concept borne out of the actions of European settlers in the Americas, (p.1). An industrial revolution, war, and consequently a shortage of labor led to the kidnapping of nearly "12.5 million Africans who were shipped to the Americas," who were used for labor and traded between slave masters for generations thereafter (Dorau, 2020, p. 1).

Dorau (2020), expands on the conscious retelling of racial history in the Americas with her insight into the duplicity of so-called reformation, a turn in the tide was seen to occur with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, followed by the ratification of the Thirteenth amendment which ended the legal tenure of slavery in the United States. She intimates that these changes however did not extinguish the discrimination of people of color, in fact, it allowed for more sinister forms of discrimination to occur, what modern day literature on race and race talk has named, 'microaggressions.' A historical example of this phenomenon would be Abraham

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Lincoln's predilection to referring to white people as the superior race despite his fight for the freedom of slaves from their slave masters (p.2)

It is said that The Emancipation Proclamation was particularly important for slaves who resided in the South as they reportedly made up one-third of the entire population. Over time, more effort was placed to ensure people of color were afforded equal rights to their white peers through the passing of the Civil Rights Act, as well as the announcing of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendment. It unfortunately became clear in the decades to come that these legal turns did not mollify upheld beliefs that people of color occupy an inferior position in society; once the federal government pulled its troops from the South, a surge in the mistreatment of Black people occurred in the 1870's. White supremacist groups such as the White League and the infamous Ku Klux Klan led and instigated efforts to carry out heinous and violent acts against Black people, with the former receiving support from law enforcement as they sought to impoverish Black people and their communities (Dorau, 2020, p.2).

Introduction of the Jim Crow laws saw to it that injustices against Black communities permeated institutions in public service such as in education, where institutions that served black students were afforded substandard services in comparison with institutions that served predominantly white students. Disparities in educational outcomes between Black and white students were a result of a conscious act performed by some officials, for example the purposeful act of little to no investment in southern black schools by federal and local governments that resulted in poor educational outcomes for Black children, (Dorau, 2020, p.3)

Insidious practices such as explained above help feed into the current narrative of American society existing both as a beacon of egalitarian values i.e., that all individuals are treated equally and are provided the same opportunities and resources to excel in society, as well

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as an upholder of meritocratic ideals i.e., that intellect will always positively satisfy achievement, (Muhammad, 2015, p. 37-40). It is of course a concept disputed through research by scholars for example, Anderson (2012), carried out ethnographic research in inner-city neighborhoods focusing on their schools that served a Black majority of students, it was found that Black children, especially Black males, face considerable environmental and systemic distress that lead to poor academic outcomes, (pp. 594).

### **Conceptualizing the Achievement Gap**

Education is often touted as a tool in which an individual can achieve their dreams. In following with projected American ideology that supposedly stands for egalitarianism, every student regardless of race, socioeconomic status, and any other variable factors should have an equal chance at achieving academic success, Muhammad, 2015, p.37). Well documented though, is the absence of equality in educational quality standards, Fram, Miller-Cribbs, and Van Horn (2007) emphasize that the American educational system does not uphold an egalitarian ideology, and in fact racial inequity and socioeconomic status play a big part in determining the success that students experience. Researchers have documented other perspectives when it comes to conceptualizing the achievement gap such as cultural and attitudinal differences that directly affect the student, as well as cultural dynamics that sustain achievement gaps such as functionalism that would posit that current social and economic inequities are integral to the ecosystem in existence, and exist within people of color for a reason, (p.310).

According to Muhammad (2015), the achievement gap can be defined as the identifiable differences in the level of academic performance, and success within various groups of students. He states that various scholars and researchers have focused on racial inequality as a forerunner and attributing factor on the existence of the achievement gap (p. 13). Scholars have

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disseminated this implication and posited that the markers of the gap can be accounted for through disparities in, “grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, drop-out rates, discipline processes, and college-completion rates (Muhammad, 2015, p.13).

### **Grades**

The achievement of African American students has been extensively researched, especially in the framework of the Black-white achievement gap. According to Muhammad (2015), the American educational system looks primarily to a students’ performance in two major areas of study; mathematics and English. A student’s performance in these two areas is recorded into their Nation’s report card (NAEP), which is accessible to various institutional and community stakeholder’s for analysis (p. 15). An uptick in the general performance of African American students has been reported by the NAEP, unfortunately, disaggregating this data has displayed a disturbing trend regarding the Mathematics and English performance rates of African American students; a staggering amount of African American students graduate twelfth grade only possessing eighth-grade level knowledge in both Mathematics and English (p.15).

Hallinan (2001), reports that a study conducted by the NAEP reveals other concerning trends in the achievement of Black students, stating that black students are more likely than their white counterparts to repeat a grade, are less likely to complete their college courses if they are accepted into a higher education institution, and upon the completion of college, receive discouraging feedback from employers who will compensate their white peers at a much higher rate than they will compensate them (p.52-53).

**Standardized test-scores**

As previously mentioned, meritocracy is one of the dominant features of the values we see in American society, and this ideal that views perceived intelligence as being a gateway to opportunities. Au (2016), delves into the effects of this ideal within the pedagogy, explaining that standardized test-scores rely heavily on perceived intelligence which is measured within a Eurocentric framework (p.39). It should be noted that the concept of measurable intelligence was pioneered as a racial project in the United states; “cognitive psychologists such as Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, and Robert Yerke’s misrepresented the IQ test created by French psychologist Alfred Binet, by marrying intelligence with race and class politics,” and creating now disputed ideologies on the existence of higher levels of intelligence only existing within white, upper class individuals (Au, 2016, p. 30).

Standardized testing was created for the purpose of creating equality within the distribution of opportunities for students, but due to the systemic stronghold that attributing factors such as racial inequality play in the availability of environmental opportunities, it has only stood to create more unequal opportunities for students of color (Au, 2016, p. 40). On this matter, it is concerning that educators persist in the use of standardized testing as a determinant of academic pathways for students, As it is explained further in the study, “test-based structural denial works to diminish the social presence of other attributing factors such as race and poverty,” creating the illusion that individuals who don’t succeed didn’t try hard enough (p. 46)

Hung, Smith, Voss, Franklin, Gu, & Bounsanga (2020), conducted a study to determine the impact of opportunities in the environment on the achievement gap within the educational institutions in the community. Results of the study indicated that in addition to economic inequality and household educational attainment, racial inequality was an attributing factor to the

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levels of achievement among the student population. In the study, which focused on students between the third and eighth grades hailing from 2,868 diverse school districts, the achievement gap was operationally defined in the framework of standardized test-scores as well as the grades of the students on two subject areas: Math and English. In comparing attributes of interest such as race with the test scores of students, results of their study indicate that districts that housed more ethnically diverse students displayed lower performance scores in math and English (p.176-179).

### **Course selection**

Other researchers emphasize this point further, according to Muhammad, (2015, p.14) high schools in the United States that serve student populations dominated by students of color are less likely to offer rigorous higher-level Science or Math courses when compared with schools that serve predominantly white students. Furthermore, students of color tend to represent a miniscule percentage of students enrolled in gifted programs even in schools where they are dominantly represented in the general student body; they are more likely to be placed in classes with less experienced educators than their white peers, and face expulsion and suspensions from school at rates three times higher than their white peers (p.15).

### **Discipline processes**

Morris and Perry (2016) delve into the role that punishment plays in the underachievement of African American students, they posit the following:

Punishment is seen as a novel culprit in the underachievement of African American students but should be highlighted as a primary cause due to the insidiousness of its effects. Punishment is doled out on perceptions, and therefore can be influenced by biases; it can also vary in intensity such as an in-school detention versus a school

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suspension which pulls a student away from the school entirely, and finally exclusionary activities such as detentions and suspensions are over used due to the scant knowledge on other behavior management practices that could be effective in shaping desired behavior.

It is argued that the discipline flow chart has been formulated to mirror a prison rehabilitation framework, with slogans such as ‘zero tolerance policies’ that increase the frequency of major repercussions for slight infractions, as well as the presence of uniformed police officers in schools. (p. 69-70)

A meta-analysis of the literature suggests that punishment has been racialized within the school setting, as evidenced by a study conducted by the Children’s Defense Fund, that found African American students were three times more likely to be suspended from school than their white peers, and were more likely to face an escalation in their behavioral reprimands such as mandated court appearances and probationary services. In earlier research, it was found that one out of six African American students were suspended from school within the school year, and that schools that hosted many minority students dictated ‘zero tolerance policies’ as their first course of disciplinary action. It is important to understand the impact that escalated forms of punishment have on learning and academic success in order to conceptualize the crux of the problem. It is important to understand the impact that escalated forms of punishment have on learning and academic success in order to conceptualize the crux of the problem; suspensions are reported to provide no favors to the academic success of a student, in fact, schools that report a high number of school suspensions also report low academic performances from their students (Morris & Perry, 2016, p. 70-71).

In a meta-analysis of literature, Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, (2020) discuss punishment within the framework of safety efforts and racial disproportionality in ethnically diverse schools.

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According to their findings, Black students are disproportionately punished within school settings; 1 in 5 black students compared to 1 in 10 white students were subjected to a suspension (p. 59).

Carry-over effects of suspensions or expulsions were noticeable with the academic performance of the students, in a study that followed two cohorts that differed on the basis of a suspension, students in the cohort that had received the suspension fell three grade levels behind their peers in the cohort who did not receive suspensions in their reading skills, and were five years behind almost two years later (p. 60). Expounding effects of disciplinary decisions such as expulsions have other effects such as disengagement, “students may become less bonded to school, less invested in school rules and coursework, and subsequently, less motivated to achieve academic success.” (p.60). It is critical that educators introduce other behavioral interventions for students, as is pointed out by Fisher and Kennedy who state that students who lack motivation are less likely to engage in school and are therefore more likely to drop-out of school.

### **Drop-out rates**

A sobering view on drop-out rates as a marker is clearly discussed by Fisher and Kennedy, (2017) who report that the United States department Education center for Education Statistics (NCES) calculated that national average graduation rate stands at 80 %, offering a baseline for a comparison between the graduation rates of white students (84%), black students (67%), Hispanic students (71%), and American Pacific Islander students who come in with the lowest rates at 65 %. It has been posited that other factors such as socioeconomic status, disabilities, and English literacy levels contribute to these statistics, but it is also obvious that race group membership does contribute to the levels of achievement of students (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016, p.152).



**College-completion rates**

In 2013, a statistical report was released by the Advisory committee on Student Financial Assistance based in Washington D.C., that detailed the results of a decade long meta-analysis of studies conducted by education scholars and researchers interested in the relationship between inequality and college completion rates. A delineation of the report indicated that socio-economic status, course selection in high school, and parental involvement were key factors in determining whether a student would complete college. In the report, the (ACSF, 2010) indicated that “over one million bachelor’s degrees were lost between the years of 2000 and 2010,” and that “ongoing loss of bachelor’s degrees will exacerbate existing disparities in educational attainment by race, ethnicity, and family income,” (p. 3). It is further reported that the likelihood of Hispanic and Black students completing college was determined by their induction to a four-year or two-year college; students from these two racial groups were more likely to complete college if they attended a four-year college, (p.5)

It is important to examine this factoid, as Hispanic and Black students were more inclined and encouraged to enroll in two-year colleges due to the lower tuition bills that most two-year colleges offer, (ACSF, 2010, p.5). Results of one study disseminated for the report indicated that only 41% of low-income Black students out of the 86% expected to earn a four-year degree actually enrolled in a four-college, and that only, “32% of Black students enrolled in either four of two-year colleges managed to complete a four-year degree,” (ACSF, 2010, p.6).

Banks & Dohy (2018), present a more linear picture of the data, unveiling through a meta-analysis of completion rates in four-year institutions that, African American students were the least likely to graduate; their white peers graduated at the rate of 67.2 % while they graduated at a rate of 45.9% (p.1). Furthermore, data indicated that disparities existed even through the

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transfer student pipeline, indicating that 1 out of 5 white transfer students went onto graduate with a four-year degree compared to 1 out of 13 African American Students, (p.1).

Recent research on the existence of the achievement gap in education has converted to discussions on opportunity gaps as barriers to the educational attainment of African American students. Banks & Dohy (2018), discuss social issues such as the state of “housing, nutrition, safety, and enriching experiences,” as inroads to low educational achievement for African American students, (p.1). It is however imprudent and dangerous to negate the impact that race and racial inequality have on the educational achievement of African American Students. Reports of macro and micro aggressions that African American students experience on campuses across the United States are ample, in an article for the New York Times, African American Students reported nooses were hung in their University’s student center, and the underwhelming response by the institution to the incident where they cited colorblindness as a rebuttal (p.2). It is reported that incidences of racism in predominately white institutions can lead African American students and other students of color to be disengaged, underperform, and drop out of school, (p.2).

Representation also factors highly into the college completion conundrum, Banks & Dohy (2018), state that most university professors in the United States are white, which “supports the maintenance of the status quo, and a lack of variance in the curriculum and high-quality mentorship for African American students from faculty who look like them,” (p. 2). An imbalance in representation can have long lasting emotional and mental effects on African American students; the ‘feeling of belonging’ is considered one of the most important predictors of college completion for all college students, yet most African American students reported

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feelings of inferiority, a lack of relation with counselors, teachers, and instructors, and beliefs that those in authority did not care to intervene in their failures or encourage the successes, (p.3).

### **Opportunity gap or Achievement Gap?**

A recent debate in research hopes to develop a more holistic view of the disparities in education. In a book review, Hall, (2013) explores the impact of opportunity gaps versus those of achievement gaps. Opportunity gaps are said to be the “larger issue,” (p.335) and cement the need to make changes to the American Educational system as in a pool of 65 countries, American students are said to fall behind 31 countries in Math proficiency, and 16 countries in Reading proficiency,” (p.335). A consistent focus on the achievement gaps between racial groups or gender groups is found to be more costly to the efforts to close the gaps, as these gaps do not solely exist between racial groups in America, but also between American students and students from other countries as well. According to Hall, (2013) a focus of educational reform should be directed towards closing gaps in:

The teacher equality gap, the teacher training gap, the challenging curriculum gap, the school funding gap, the digital divide gap, the wealth and income gap, the employment opportunity gap, the affordable housing gap, the healthcare gap, the nutrition gap, the school integration gap, and the quality childcare gap, (p.338)

In exploring solutions to close the gaps, more holistic ventures can be implemented, such as: a) creating adjustments in the makeup of relationships between teachers and their students as in developing teacher engagement strategies to increase cultural competency, and b) developing curricula that mirrors the students experiences to mobilize students to socio-political consciousness, and encourage help-seeking behaviors. It is stated that these interventions would

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serve to improve teacher-student relations, thereby reducing occurrences of barriers to achievement such as suspensions and expulsions, (Hall, 2013, p.339-340).

A solid argument is made for the focus to shift to achievement gaps, but the reality is that an application to develop a more holistic intervention would still leave African American Students behind, as evidenced by the attempts of American Congress to enact two Education policy Acts that still leave African American children behind. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), was approved for implementation in 2001 and aimed to increase enforce the accountability of educational stakeholders in providing quality education to all students regardless of their group membership. According to Leatherwood & Payne (2016), NCLB was a standards-based reform that failed to acknowledge the differences that different students possess such as socioeconomic status and race, and in doing so had allowed for the same “top down efforts to rationalize schools,” (p.563). A more rational attempt would be to decentralize education standards and recognize that, “standards based reform works out to mean one thing in a blue state like Maryland, another in a purple state like Michigan, and something still different in a red state like Utah,” (p.563).

Knight (2019), conducted a study to explore if Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enacted in 2016 was operative. It was identified that No Child Left Behind fell short in providing equity in two areas: access to funding, and access to experienced teachers in schools that hosted predominantly students of color. In the study, observations into whether the distribution of teacher salaries, teacher experience, and student-teacher ratios were equal within school districts, as well as whether funding per-student within districts affected the availability of teachers in high-poverty districts and high-minority schools. On a national level, data from the study displayed that high-minority and high-poverty schools received, “less funding, lower proportions

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of experienced teachers, and fewer teachers,” (p.617). On the other hand, a comparison on schools within the same school district, the data showed that teachers in high-poverty and high-minority schools were paid more, but were less experienced when compared to higher resourced schools within the same school district.

According to Fram, Miller-Cribs and Van Horn, (2007) schools where ethnic minorities make up the majority group tend to receive little to no federal funding that impact the quality and availability of resources required for both staff and students to succeed.

Fram, Miller-Cribbs, and Van Horn (2007) conducted a research study aimed specifically at analyzing the role that race, socioeconomic status, family, classroom, and school factors play in influencing the educational experiences of students. The study followed 3,501 kindergarten-aged students until they completed their first-grade year who attended schools in 246 schools in the South (p. 311-312). The sample size consisted of white students (56 %), black students (29.2%), and Hispanic students (14.8%). Fifty-two percent of the participants were male, and forty-eight percent were female (p. 314). Out of the total number participants, 1,338 students attended high-ethnic minority schools, which are characterized by a student’s body consisting of an overwhelming number of students of color compared with white students.

Several findings suggest that attendance in these schools was costing the students quality educational standards as it was reported that the schools with a high-ethnic minority population hired teachers with considerably lower teaching experience and certifications, as well as hosted classrooms that were not adequately equipped with resources that would ensure proper learning (p. 313). It is appropriate to be concerned as it has been found that, “teachers who are more experienced, possess stronger academic and cognitive skills, and acquire subject-specific preparation and expertise, have positive effects on student learning, (p. 311).

### **Implications for educational stakeholders**

The achievement of closing the gap is going to be an uphill battle and changing the internal dynamics of the American educational system might be one area we need to work on. Utilizing stakeholders that are in constant contact with students and their families, such as teachers and school counselor's, might prove to be effective in making effective changes.

Mason, Hughey and Burke (2019), discuss the use of William Glasser's choice theory in closing the achievement gap as it applies the idea of Glasser's Quality School model that encourages teachers to, "build competence and eliminate both failure and discipline problems," (p.21). According to Glasser, schools that are successful work on creating an environment that, appreciates trust and respect; makes sure to include all stakeholder's voices in decisions that impact school culture; discards the use of punishment in favor of practices that encourage connection such as supporting, caring, and listening; encourages ownership and responsibility taking over the choices one makes; as well as moves away from labeling students with disorders that put them at peril of internalization and self-fulfilling prophecies, (p.21-22).

Mayer and Tucker (2010), offer more support to the idea of building relationships with students, it is stated that students of color in particular benefit from this intervention as teachers and school counselors then become conduits to, "provide connections to social and cultural capital that might be absent through a student's familial relationships," (p.474). A connection to social and cultural capital can breed even bigger positive effects, as this might endear students to become more conscious of their identity, and therefore connect with the socio-political realities associated with their identities. It is stated that students who possess this socio-political consciousness are more resilient and are more likely to engross themselves in civic engagement,

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(Seider, Graves, El-Amin, Scoutter, Tamerat, Jennett, Clark, Malhotra, & Johannsen, 2018, p.169-171).

According to Hines, Moore, Mayes, Harris, Vega, Robinson, Gray, & Jackson (2020), school counselors are important stakeholders within the school as they address the, “academic, social, and career development of their students,” (p.219). Achieving effectiveness will require school counselor’s to be, a) leaders who work to encourage collaboration between stakeholders in order to ensure all their students success, b) advocates for systemic change who collaborate with stakeholders and utilize data to communicate institutional needs to all stakeholders, c) counselors and coordinators who use creative and innovative ways to facilitate brief, individual and group sessions to meet student needs, and d) data driven in their use of assessments and reports that they will use to plan for, and implement school wide policies, (p. 223-224).

### **Conclusion**

In reviewing the literature, we see several studies that show how racial inequality contributes to the achievement gap. Studies have identified that several markers in the current American educational paradigm such as grades, standardized test-scores, college-completion rates, punishment disparities, and drop-out rates that make a case for group membership based on race leading to the underachievement of African American students. Other considerations such as changing the system for every student are helpful only if they run parallel to the internal systemic changes that will ensure educational equality for all students. A shift in research calls for a focus on opportunity gaps instead of achievement gaps in order to avoid top-down policies that fail to ensure the success of all students, but as evident in the review, policies enacted are still falling short of this goal. It might be helpful for researchers to explore a framework that explores the decentralization of the educational system as well as a conscious rebuilding of it to

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encompass systemic internal changes that account for the barriers that racial group membership has on educational equality.



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